

CRWR 1100

SHORT STORY

DUE October 31st, 2019 (Deadline Extended to November 7th, 2019 by prof). Amended July 3rd, 2021.

6-8 pages (1500-2000 words), double-spaced and from the third-person point of view.

The Hartford Typist:

Whirrt The drill press arched down, before slowly rising in its line of travel out of the hole it had made in the block of steel held in a vice to its table. The gunsmith paused to wipe his brow, on his forearm, before turning off the machine, unfastening the vice, and taking the newly reshaped block of steel away for further finishing. A gust of midnight air whistled in through the broken window pane on the north side, sending shards of metal dust cascading across the silent factory floor. He shivered, and then sighed. It had been three days since he went down to the 'speak easy' with Bennet—at his invitation—to catch up and reminisce about old times.

He'd been friends with the man in senior year of high school; at least, he thought he had... That was half a decade ago now. He still remembered when they went to enlist together in July of 1917, right after graduation, without a single look back. His mother had been livid; she been boasting to the other neighbourhood mothers about her "darling son's" aspirations towards a career in mechanical engineering, and wanted nothing to do with the war. His father however, had taken a more pragmatic approach. "Now, you'd best be sure son." His father had said; and after much back and forth, he'd helped him bring mother to terms with his choice.

From there they'd parted ways; he'd gone off to basic training with the US Army corps of engineers, while Bennet had joined the Infantry. He'd thought they might see each-other again in the troop transports, or on European soil, but fate had other plans. His unit was just days away from shipping out to Europe when he'd taken a bullet to the leg in a training accident. He still remembered the day with biting vividness. Billy Parsons had been added to their unit of the Expeditionary Force late, and the

fellow seemingly didn't know the Safety on a Springfield to save his life. "You have more to fear from him than the Krauts!" was the common expression of derision. The non-coms gave Billy about as much flak over it as his fellows, but he was still implacably forgetful. It was only a matter of time until something happened, so when ol' Billy tripped on the march, and shot him in the leg, no one was overly surprised. Billy received the full brunt of military discipline, but that did little for Greg Hawthorn, who now had a tunnel in his right thigh. The nurses at the military hospital had told him that only a miracle prevented the bullet from striking the femoral artery or shattering the bone. Even for a graze, the wound had been devastating; he'd been spared the bone saw, if nothing else. During his recovery, he resumed his engineering studies, and read voraciously. But by the time he recovered enough to walk, the war was over, and he was in need of a job.

On the basis of his training with the Army corps of engineers and a reference letter from the commander of his training base to an old friend, he landed a job with Colt, and moved to Hartford Connecticut. They'd set him to work building 1911's for a year, until he'd mastered them, before setting him on the production line for a new submachine gun—the Thompson. Things were looking up for him. He'd met and married his wife Sasha, after an introduction by her brother at a company social event, followed by a brief courtship; they had their first child on the way, and he'd remodelled the attic of their modest abode into a livable space. The changes hadn't all been good news; with all the surpluses from the war, and burgeoning peace, there were rumours of pending layoffs at the armoury, or at least a reallocation towards the civilian market after this current bulk order was finished. Added to that, prohibition had come the year before, but thanks to his connections, his bosses had shared work-arounds for that. Speakeasies had sprouted up in every city and town across the land, to answer the demands of the market, moral puritans be damned. So in the face of such growth and change, it had been staggering to run into an old friend from the past...

Last Friday, he had stayed late to clean up. Having been with the company for over a year, they trusted him enough to do some extra work on his own, but he still hadn't earned sufficient seniority to simply call it a day whenever he felt like once the things on his preliminary "to do" list for the day were done. If he finished everything early, they would just stack on more. They might consider paying him more as a reward for being more productive, but letting him off early was usually out of the question. Moreover, he welcomed the long hours; Sasha's morning sickness was making her unpalatable to be around, and he welcomed the chance at extra money for simply padding out the clock an extra half hour cleaning the floors on his own.

He had made his way into the back alley, and was struggling to drag a near-empty garbage can full of dust and shavings to the scrap bin out back, when he heard it. Scratching at the lock, like a thousand mice chewing on hard tack. He heard the tumblers begin to turn, and stiffened. The scratching stopped. He emptied the weight from the can so his feeble leg could support his throw of it if necessary. The door opened.

A black silhouette of a man appeared in the doorway. Greg stood backlit by the lights of the factory floor beyond, and took a step back into the light, as the silhouette reached inside his jacket. He wished he'd brought something with him; his pistol from home, a hammer from the factory floor, anything. But before Greg could do anything, an oddly once familiar voice arose from the silhouette.

"Hawthorn?!" ... "Hawthorn, is that you?"

"Bennet?" he whispered in disbelief, and then, as the recognition washed over him, he shouted it. "Bennet! My god man, it's been so long, I thought you'd died in Belgium. Good to see you again." "Same to you old friend." The two men forgot themselves for a moment, exchanged greetings, and moved over to one of the work benches to chat. After a brief pause, Greg Hawthorn came back to his senses.

“Just what the devil are you doing out here?” He asked.

“That’s neither here nor there.” He rebuked, his eyes loosing their nostalgic twinkle, and instead becoming cold, before softening as his lips adopted a Cheshire cat’s whimsical reverie.

“Tell you what, let’s get out of here and grab us a drink, ah?”

“I’m not sure that’s such a good idea.” Greg intoned.

“Awe come on!” Bennet replied. “A night of cards and booze at the ‘speak easy’ will do you good.” He said; “Cards and booze” with your ol pal eh, how about it?

As they drank at the table, they filled one another in on the major events of their lives over the past half-decade since they’d seen each-other. Bennet talked eagerly about his time in basic, and listened attentively to Greg’s story, but was remarkably unforthcoming, about his time in Europe or since. The night dragged on, as empty bottles battlements arose in the corner of the table.

Though he didn’t say it at first, it was glaringly obvious to Greg Hawthorn what Bennet had been up to these past few years. The way Bennet had picked the lock to the factory door, the fact that he had been armed, the fact that he could access the speakeasy without a password, since the doorman knew him by name, the fact that he appeared to be a regular at the illegal gambling tables of the speakeasy that Greg had thus-far avoided like the plague; taken together, all these things made it all too apparent what Bennet was doing, and who he had become. So when the chips were down, and he politely called in the favour to an old friend, there was nothing for a Daniel in the lion’s den—as Greg was—to do but comply or pray. He stared into space for a few minutes, the other’s words never quite sinking in until much later. When he awoke the next morning, everything that night was a blur, but even as he nursed a splintering headache, he could not forget how it had ended.

"You can either deliver me the two hundred dollars you owe me, and the three hundred you owe the boss, or you can provide us with three of those new Thompsons your factory is building, and we'll call it even." Bennet said. His demeanor was friendly, and his words were businesslike, but the kind platitudes stopped at the eyes. Bennet was no-longer the man he once knew. He'd been played for a fool, and he would be hard pressed to get out of this alive without ending up in a cell. Three hundred dollars was enough to buy a new car; the average factory worker only made 90 cents (\$0.90) a day. Coming up with \$500 from anywhere would be impossible. The game was rigged from the start, and he knew it; not that that mattered now...

He'd bided his time throughout his shift, plotting how best to go about it. The parts were serialized, so anything unaccounted for would likely be missed. The only way to do it would be from scratch, with unserialized parts, made from off-cuts of steel that would not be missed. He'd only just recently started on the production line for the Thompsons; a 1911 he could probably make blindfolded in a day, but these were a wholly new beast, and his client was an impatient one, able to attack him emotionally due to intimate knowledge of his personal vulnerabilities, as well as employ blackmail or threats of overt force if he wanted. Bennet had him cornered, and he knew it.

Back on the floor, he kept going until 3am, took a nap, slunk out at 4:30am, and came back in with the rest for the start of shift at 5am. He had succeeded in milling out the three unregistered receivers; there could be no turning back now. He returned home that night, and apologized profusely to his wife for being so distant in the past few days, explaining that he'd been held up late at work, and chosen to sleep at his desk, that he should have told her, and that he was sorry for being neglectful. She was rightfully annoyed at the outset—and, he thought, suspicious—but she ultimately forgave him for that minor indiscretion.

Her baby bump was blooming prominently. She was eight and a half months pregnant; it wouldn't be long now.

"Do you think it will be a boy or a girl?" she asked, caressing the crown of the lump in her belly.

"My father's firstborn was a girl, so tradition bears that out as likely, but I hope it's a boy. Either is fine; we have plenty of time to make more." She smiled at his remark, but even as he finished the sentence, he'd started to frown at the patent untruth of it all.

"What's wrong?" She asked him. Realizing that she had detected something was amiss, he rebounded off of the existing topic.

"Oh not much, I was just thinking that if we have a second child, they'll have to share the attic. Our son and daughter sharing a room would certainly scandalize the neighbours, and we can afford better."

She laughed jovially at his impromptu joke, recognition of his prior concern seemingly forgotten.

"I'm told that such arrangements are not uncommon in Europe, where most families have less space, but you may be right as far as things go here. Assuming that we don't end up with two boys or two girls, moving to a bigger house might be a good idea; and besides" she said, eyeing him candidly, "I have no intention of stopping at just two." She grasped his hand, pulling him in, and he came to her...

Some hours later, he woke up, stepped into the living room, lit the fire, and ignited his cigarette off the embers. He sat down, splayed across the ottoman, and drifted into the abyssal darkness, as he plotted his next move.

Weeks passed. For two nights a week he would work for several hours on hand crafting copies of the necessary parts; he would always come home from work the following day haggard, and emotionally distant. His wife knew something was amiss, but said nothing. A little over a month after his reunion with Bennet, his wife gave birth; it was a son after all.

“What should we name him?” She had asked. He thought about it for a minute, and then replied.

“David, because he shall be the one to overcome challenges larger than we can even dream.” She pursed her lips in thought for a moment.

“That’s certainly putting a lot of pressure on him.” She smiled. “But he’s his father’s son, so I’m sure he will rise to the challenge.”

That night, Bennet came to him, and knocked on the door of his house.

“Let’s go for a drive.” He said.

Greg donned his hat, and joined his old friend in the back seat of the car; it was of finer make than he was used to. In the front seat, he could see two enforcers who were there to eavesdrop on their conversation, leave him in a ditch, or otherwise do whatever Bennet wanted. He was a cornered rat.

“Don’t mind them.” He said, with an eye to the other two men, before continuing.

“Hey buddy, good to see you again. How’d Sasha’s labour go? She doing alright?” He confirmed his assertion, and reassured him that she was fine, then stopped; though he’d talked about his wife, he never to his knowledge disclosed his wife’s name to Bennet. How did he know?

“And the kid?” He asked. “Boy or girl?”

“It’s a boy” Greg relied. “We named him David.”

Bennet smiled. “A good Christian name with ambitious overtones; well picked, though I’d have preferred an Italian name myself.” Greg wondered why he would care so much about his son’s name. From the context, his words should have been malicious, but he sensed nothing threatening in his tone; he seemed almost relieved to hear that his wife and newborn child were in good spirits.

At last, the pleasantries ran their course, and Bennet got down to business. “So listen, I don’t mind waiting a bit longer on my payment, but the boss is getting impatient.” They went back and forth on

details for half an hour, before the spooks in front dropped Greg back at his house. They waited until he Greg was back inside, before driving off. As they did so, one of the enforcers up front turned to Bennet and asked "You think he has any idea that it's your kid?"...

The following night, Greg was back at the shop.

He'd managed to build two of the three Thompsons in increments of a sparse few hours a night over nearly a month and a half, and had managed to avoid getting caught. He was putting the finishing touches on the last one when things took a turn. It was four in the morning; the staff didn't usually arrive until 5am. Tonight however, he heard a noise, and ran to hide, leaving the unserialized, half assembled Thompson lying on the bench, and the factory floor lights on.

He heard his coworkers traipsing in, remarking about someone having left the power on. Conversation shifted to setting up an impromptu surprise party for an hour before shift in celebration of his new son's birth. Such struck him as odd, but as he continued listening, he learned that his wife had arranged for the other mothers of the neighbourhood to lean on their husbands to arrange it. They had in turn, worked it out with the boss for everyone to start and end shift an hour later than usual. Finally, as the hours ticked by, and he remained absent as of 6am, the men began setting about their work, mildly disappointed, and confused. Not a day in all his time with the company had he been late without advanced notice. Even when he was sick he would show up, call in, or send a messenger with word on ahead to the boss. That was when someone noticed the Thompson lying on the table; noticed that it wasn't quite built to spec, and that it bore no serial numbers or other markings. It was only a matter of time before they put it all together. Getting the mob off his back would do him no good, now that the long arm of the law had encroached on his workplace, and would—in due time—pervade the homes of everyone with a key to the factory doors. He couldn't give Bennet and his boss half of what they

demanded, and renege on the rest; nor could he turn to the police for safety without pleading guilty for deeds already done, for which evidence had been found.

He may have missed the war, but he'd never thought himself a coward; at least, not until his reunion with Bennet. Until then, he'd never really been tested. He had never known the bounds of his limits. Backed into a wall as he was, he knew that he could surpass them now, with a clear conscience. That evening, he snuck out of the factory after dark, and returned home to retrieve his wares, which he wordlessly stowed in the back of the family's car. He had saved up for nearly a year to buy it. Hard honest sweat and toil had bought that car for him; never mind that the illegal firearms in the boot were roughly equal in value. His leg was giving him trouble after standing, hidden away in the closet for all those long hours. He had wanted to say goodbye to his wife, but he didn't dare. Had he but crept midway up the stairs, he would have heard Bennet whispering to Sasha as he ravished her, speaking in muted tones about a forthcoming musical performance at the speakeasy next Sunday, and how they should go together if Greg could be kept busy, and *their* son David tended to. Neither knew what Greg had planned for Bennet's organization.

The next day, Greg showed up to the speakeasy at around noon. He had with him two Violin cases, one under each arm. He set them down, wrapped on the door, gave the password, and followed up saying "I'm here to see the boss."

A few moments later, they were in one of the back rooms. He motioned for Greg to pull up a chair. Greg uncased one of the Thompsons, and handed it to the boss, who eyed it lustfully. Greg went on.

"Sir, I"—

"Don is fine" the man corrected him.

“I, er... Don then. Don, I know these are being delivered to you as payment for a debt, however, I have a related problem on which I would like your advice.”

“Oh?”

“You are familiar with your subordinate Bennet, who brought me here?” Greg reminded the Don of the similar debt owed to his old friend, and informed him of the police inspection of his workplace.

“Under the circumstances, I can’t fulfill my end of the agreement with him, and I was hoping for your council in order to find some other means by which to make amends.”

“Hmmm.” The Don said, furrowing his brow, as he leaned deeper into the chair. He picked his next words carefully. “I think, you shall find that it is he who owes you, and by a great deal... Tell me, how closely have you been paying attention to your wife over this past year that you have been married?”

The question struck him like a broadside of grapeshot to the chest. “My wife?!”

“Indeed. If you weren’t aware, the two have been holding an affair behind your back for about 10 months now; it was arranged that the two of you should meet by your brother in law; he was, in turn, trying to compel her to settle down with someone upstanding before it was too late. Evidently it seems he missed his mark, as Bennet had gotten to her first. That son of yours is probably his too.”

Greg stared on in shocked disbelief.

The Don took a deep breath, and let out a deep sigh. “I have a proposal for you. Your skills are more useful to me than Bennet’s. How about I bring him and your wife here to validate my claims; you can dispense with Bennet as you wish, but in exchange, you will work for me from now on. Deal?”

With a devilish smile, he reached out his hand. With a moment’s hesitation, Greg reached forward, and shook.

END.